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SIPDIS

NSC STAFF FOR SINGH

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SUBJECT: SECTARIAN VIOLENCE NEAR LUXOR

Classified by ECPO Minister Counselor Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Summary: The village of Udayssat, 23 km south of Luxor, witnessed sectarian strife on January 18-20, resulting in clashes and the murder of a Christian man and the death of a Christian boy in murky circumstances. As of January 23, a heavy police presence remains in the area. A leading local Coptic analyst told us that the GOE is now focused on the problem in Udayssat, but a visiting U.S. Coptic activist said that he blames the GOE for not doing more to prevent the violence. End summary.

2. (C) According to Embassy religious freedom contacts, the unlicensed church in question serves a small Coptic minority numbering approximately 350 families (about 2,500 people), out of a total village population of nearly 40,000 people, the rest of whom are Muslim. The church, which has operated intermittently since 1971 (albeit without a license), stands on the site of a church that was burned by an arsonist in 1968, also reportedly during sectarian tensions.

3. (C) According to Watani newspaper publisher Yousef Sidhom (protect), in December 2005 Coptic Bishop Youannes (Personal Secretary to the Pope) "received a green light from security contacts" to proceed with regular prayer services at the Udayssat church. A local priest conducted the first services in some time on January 17, the day before the Coptic Epiphany. Shortly thereafter, an unnamed local security official visited the church. Sidhom declined to draw a link between the visit by the security officer and the January 18 attack, but noted that the events raised serious questions about why the authorities did not take immediate steps to protect the church. On January 18 several hundred Muslim citizens in the settlement surrounded and vandalized the property. In the ensuing melee, more than a dozen people were injured, including Christian and Muslim villagers, as well as several police personnel.

4. (C) In the aftermath of the initial clashes, on the morning of January 20 unknown assailants set upon and killed Kamal Shaker Megalaa, a 47 year old Christian farmer as he returned from his fields. The Luxor district attorney has instructed the police to arrest several suspects (who are Muslims from Udayssat) in connection with the murder. Also on January 20, a ten-year-old boy, Guirgis, reportedly died "from shock." The dead boy's family lives adjacent to the church and, according to Sidhom, he had been traumatized by the violence that occurred.

5. (C) The Coptic Orthodox patriarch, Pope Shenouda III, has reportedly raised the Udayssat matter with presidential advisor Zakariya Azmi. Coptic Church sources are reporting that Azmi has given assurances that the Udayssat church will receive a license.

6. (C) Comment: In Sidhom's view, the Udayssat incident appears to be over. Sidhom implied that the GOE could have done more to prevent the violence. Visiting AmCit Coptic activist Michael Meunier was harsher in his assessment. Meunier said that his sources in Udayssat, including the priest who supplied the documentary footage that appears on Meunier's website (www.copts.com) believed that local security officials may have played a role in fomenting the unrest. The GOE, said Meunier, needs to take a much stronger stand against such local officials. End comment.

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